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Belief, Religious Belief, and Faith

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For the past century, Anglo-American epistemological debates have pivoted around a conception of knowledge as a kind of belief which meets certain criteria. Ever since Plato, according to the familiar textbook story, knowledge was conceived as justified true belief; but in 1963 a short paper by Edmund Gettier blew a huge hole in this supposedly 'traditional' account by showing that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge.[1] The key task which Gettier left to subsequent epistemologists was to repair this hole; and this they have attempted to do mostly via a series of increasingly sophisticated analyses which (typically) address the issue of how the third condition for knowledge (to be added to true belief) should be reconceived. Although an adequate repair has proved elusive, the attempt to find the necessary and sufficient conditions which turn belief into knowledge is far from over, despite recurrent counterexamples and charges of circularity.

In my view, the solution to the problem noticed by Gettier is not to be found in a more refined set of conditions which turn belief into knowledge, but in a different conception of knowledge, belief, and their reciprocal relationship. To start with, a careful survey of ancient, medieval and early modern epistemology will reveal that the allegedly 'standard' or 'traditional' analysis of knowledge as justified true belief is in fact neither standard nor traditional. On the contrary: it is difficult to find major philosophers for thousands of years who framed the problem of knowledge and belief in these terms; and what the main historical movements and authors did say about human cognition is typically strikingly at odds with this so-called 'standard' analysis and its post-Gettier JTB+ variations.[2] In fact, leading

[1] Edmund Gettier,'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121–3.

[2] See Maria Rosa Antognazza, 'The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of its History', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (2014): 1-24. Doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2014.974020; print version: 23/1 (2015): 161-184 (esp. pp. 165-172) and Maria Rosa Antognazza – Michael Ayers, 'Knowledge and Belief from Plato to Locke', in Michael Ayers, *Knowing and Seeing: Groundwork for a New Empiricism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming 2019). Cf. also Julien Dutant, 'The Legend of the Justified True Belief Analysis',

representatives of the Western philosophical tradition conceive knowledge, belief and the relationship between them in a very different way. Instead of arguing that knowledge should be analysed in terms of belief, or belief characterized in terms of knowledge, they regard knowledge and belief as two irreducibly different mental states or cognitive modes. In other words, according to genuinely traditional views, knowledge and belief are distinct in kind in the strong sense that knowing is *not* a superior species of believing, but a mental state of a different kind.

In this paper I will argue that a specific case of belief -- religious belief -- shows in a particularly striking way that the project of turning belief into knowledge with the addition of necessary and sufficient conditions is misguided, and that a different account of cognition is therefore needed. In the final part of the paper, I will gesture at my proposal for such an alternative account. This account, I claim, is both traditional and novel – traditional insofar as it builds on some insights from the history of epistemology which should, in my view, be recovered; novel insofar as, in so doing, it proposes a conception of knowledge significantly different from what was regarded up until recently as the 'standard' account.[3]

Reformed Epistemology and Proper Basicality

Religious epistemology is concerned with the epistemic justification of religious belief. Traditionally, this justification has been approached in the framework of the justification of any belief, whether religious or secular, in terms of the evidence or reasons which can be provided in support of the belief in question. In religious epistemology, this is the approach followed by natural theology, as exemplified by arguments for the existence of God. Although these arguments have been presented, historically, as 'demonstrations', nowadays they are typically regarded as ways to support the reasonableness of believing in God's existence or as ways to reject charges of irrationality against belief in God. At best, they are

Philosophical Perspectives 29 (2015): 95–145 and Pierre Le Morvan, 'Knowledge before Gettier', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (2017): 1216-1238. JTB+ stands for Justified True Belief plus some additional condition addressing the issues raised by Gettier.

[3] These remarks are part of a broader project which will be developed in Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Thinking with Assent: Renewing a Traditional Account of Knowledge and Belief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

thought to make a convincing case for the probability of God's existence,[4] rather than constituting proofs which afford knowledge of the existence of God.

The acknowledgement of this weaker epistemological status is one of the key factors behind the rise, in the early eighties, of a new brand of religious epistemology that has swept over Anglophone analytical religious epistemology and that continues to hold sway especially in North America, namely, Reformed Epistemology.[5] Reformed Epistemology is so called due to the allegiance of its original proponents to the Protestant, 'Reformed' tradition originating from John Calvin. Its founding fathers and most prominent advocates, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff,[6] counter the failure of rational arguments to provide religious believers with knowledge of the existence of God with an altogether different approach to the rational justification of religious belief.[7] One of the traits of this alternative approach is a marked anti-intellectualism deployed in defence of the epistemic respectability of the faith of common people. "Many Reformed thinkers and theologians," Plantinga writes in a ground-breaking paper of 1981, "have rejected *natural theology* (thought of as the attempt to provide proofs or arguments for the existence of God). They have held not merely that the proffered arguments are unsuccessful, but that the whole

[4] Cf. the new version of natural theology developed by Richard Swinburne in his formidable collection of publications.

[5] In one of the most recent collections on religious epistemology, the editors of the volume note that Reformed Epistemology "remains the dominant perspective" (Matthew A. Benton, John Hawthorne, and Dani Rabinowitz, *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights in Religious Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 'Introduction').

[6] Although William Alston is usually associated with Reformed Epistemology due to some important similarities between Plantinga and Wolterstorff's views and his proposal, it seems to me that there are also significant differences, notably Alston's stress on doxastic practices and epistemic justification rather than on turning belief into knowledge. In this paper I will focus on Reformed Epistemology as advanced by Plantinga and Wolterstorff. The key text for Alston's proposal is his milestone monograph *Perceiving God: the Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

[7] See the seminal papers by Plantinga 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?', *Noûs* Vol. 15, No. 1, 1981, pp. 41-51 (reprinted in R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 133-141; quotations are from this edition; hereafter BIG); and 'Reason and Belief in God,' in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 16-93. Although Reformed Epistemology came to prominence in the early 1980's, its roots are deeper and go back at least to the late 1960's. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967.

enterprise is in some way radically misguided." (BIG 134) In Wolterstorff's more recent words:

> Faith is not the property of the intelligentsia; it inhabits all those to whom God is revealed in Christ. As such, it's OK as it is. It can use the ministrations of Christian theology. But it doesn't need to be rationally grounded to make it acceptable.[8]

In brief, Reformed Epistemology's key claim is that religious belief can be rational, "warranted", or "entitled", without any need for believers to appeal to evidence or arguments in support of their beliefs. Indeed, not only believers do not need to be aware of evidence or arguments: there need not be any such arguments or evidence at all.

Accordingly, for Wolterstorff, the target of reformed epistemology is "Enlightenment Evidentialism" as chiefly represented by John Locke. In Wolterstorff's interpretation, Locke holds that rational intuition and sense experience "evoke in us what we in the twentieth century have called 'immediate' or 'basic' beliefs – in contrast to *mediate* beliefs, which are those formed in us on the basis of other beliefs." "Reason and experience both give us direct cognitive access to certain facts of reality and, when working properly, evoke in us beliefs whose propositional content corresponds to those facts." However, for Locke, "neither reason nor experience gives us direct cognitive access to the facts corresponding to our religious beliefs."[9] Thus, for so-called "Enlightenment Evidentialism", religious beliefs must be rationally grounded in the deliverances of reason and experience in order to be rational ("entitled").

Against this "evidentialism", Wolterstorff and the reformed epistemologists want to advance the view that "the believer is entitled to his or her beliefs even though they're not rationally grounded" since "it's not true that religious beliefs in general have to be rationally grounded in the deliverances of reason and experience to be doxastically meritorious".[10]

The same sharp distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs provides the framework of Plantinga's early work in religious epistemology. A *basic* belief, Plantinga explains, is a belief with is not inferred from, or based on, other beliefs. It is *properly* basic if

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[8] Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Religious Epistemology,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, edited by William J. Wainwright, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 245-271 (here p. 269; hereafter RE).

[9] RE 252.

[10] RE 248, 265. I leave aside the question of whether this is an accurate interpretation of Locke.

one is justified, rational, warranted, entitled in holding it in this basic, non-inferential way. Examples of properly basic beliefs include perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs which ascribe mental states to other persons such as "1. I see a tree, 2. I had breakfast this morning, and 3. That person is angry". Likewise, rational intuition is also a source of properly basic beliefs (e.g. "2+1=3"). On the other hand, non-basic beliefs are beliefs which are based upon (or inferred from) other beliefs (e.g. "72 X 71=5112"). (BIG 136, 133) Non-basic beliefs are justified only if they are based on other justified beliefs. The chain of justification, however, must eventually end in basic beliefs which do not depend on other beliefs and provide, therefore, the foundation of our noetic edifice. Plantinga's polemical target is not, therefore, epistemic foundationalism as such but a specific (if historically pervasive) version of foundationalism – "classical foundationalism".

As characterized by Plantinga, classical foundationalism (which includes Woltestorff's "Enlightenment Evidentialism" as, arguably, its most paradigmatic manifestation) grants the status of proper basicality only to beliefs which are "self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses". (BIG 141) This short-list, however, is way too short for reformed epistemology. Plenty of other beliefs which do not make the short-list (so it is claimed) would be intuitively regarded as basic beliefs. Notably, religious beliefs such as "God exists". Scores of people (Plantinga argues) hold such belief in a basic way, that is, without propositional evidence or support by reasons or arguments. Why should not "God exists" count as a *properly* basic belief, Plantinga asks, along with the other properly basic beliefs excluded by classical foundationalism's unjustified and unjustifiable criterion for proper basicality? [11] "What Reformed thinkers really mean to hold", Plantinga summarises,

> is that belief in God need not be based on argument or evidence from other propositions at all. They mean to hold that the believer is entirely within his intellectual rights in believing as he does even if he doesn't know of any good theistic arguments (deductive or inductive), even if he doesn't believe that there is any such argument, and even if in fact no such argument exists. They hold that it is perfectly rational to accept belief in God without accepting it on the basis of any other beliefs or propositions at all. In a word, they hold that *belief in God is properly basic.* (BIG 134)

[11] In 'Reason and Belief in God', p. 59, Plantinga formulates classical foundationalism's criterion for proper basicality as follows: "A proposition *p* is properly basic for a person *S* if and only if *p* is either self-evident to *S* or incorrigible for *S* or evident to the senses for S."

The rationality of such basic belief in God, Plantinga continues, depends on the fact that a properly basic belief is not a *groundless* belief despite its not being based on reasons. This is shown, for instance, by basic perceptual beliefs:

> Upon having experience of a certain sort, I believe I am perceiving a tree. … My having that characteristic sort of experience … plays a crucial role in the formation and justification of that belief. We might say this experience, together, perhaps, with other circumstances, is what *justifies* me in holding it; this is the *ground* of my justification, and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself. (BIG 136)

The upshot is the following. Perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs resulting from rational intuition are *properly* basic just in case they are the direct result of cognitive faculties working properly in the appropriate circumstances. Likewise, basic belief in God is *properly* basic just in case it is the result of a well-functioning cognitive faculty – call it *sensus divinitatis* – working properly in appropriate circumstances.[12] For instance, upon experiencing a beautiful starry sky, I find myself spontaneously believing that God exists, much as upon having a certain characteristic sort of experience, I form the basic (non-inferential) belief that I am perceiving a tree. As in sense-perception the combination of properly functioning eyesight and appropriate visual stimula result in the basic belief "I see a tree", so the combination of a properly functioning faculty for being directly aware of God's presence (the *sensus divinitatis*) and appropriate stimula result in the basic belief "God exists".

The trouble is that there are also glaring dis-analogies between the two cases: the "characteristic sort of experience" which leads to the basic belief that I am perceiving a tree is that of seeing a tree, whereas the experience which leads to the basic belief that God exists is that of seeing a beautiful starry sky, not that of seeing God. It seems that some pretty hefty inference is needed to move from the beautiful starry sky to the existence of God. And if inference is needed, the belief loses its all-important status of proper basicality, that is, of belief which does not need reasons or argument to be rationally held. Not to speak of the fact that many people do not find themselves spontaneously believing that God exists upon

[12] Plantinga traces the notion of *sensus divinitatis* back to Calvin, although it is debatable whether Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* corresponds to an accurate reading of Calvin.

experiencing a beautiful starry sky – or, at any rate, not with the same kind of regularity with which people experiencing a tree form the belief that they are perceiving a tree.

Moreover, critics are quick to object that Plantinga's plan to substitute the short-list of classical foundationalism's basic beliefs with a much longer list opens the gates to epistemic anarchy. Once classical foundationalism's criterion of proper basically is ditched, it seems disturbingly easy for any belief to claim the epistemic status of proper basicality, and hence the right to be rationally held without supporting reasons, argument, or evidential backing. As for the *sensus divinitatis*, what is there to stop the followers of Snoopy from claiming that their basic belief that the "Great Pumpkin" returns every Halloween is the result of an ad hoc properly functioning cognitive faculty (say, the *sensus pumpkinitatis*)?[13]

Plantinga, however, is undeterred. Arguably, a closer analogy can be found in the case of forming basic beliefs about the mental states of other people. "If I see someone displaying typical pain behaviour, I take it that he or she is in pain", Plantinga notes. (BIG 136) His key point, as already argued in his earlier monograph of 1967 on *God and Other Minds*, is that we routinely form and accept beliefs regarding other minds even if there are no "cogent arguments of the sort required" in support of these beliefs. That is, from the point of view of classical foundationalism's injunction to believe "a proposition which is not certain (i.e. self-evident or incorrigible) only on the evidential basis of propositions that *are* certain … belief in other minds and belief in God are on an epistemological par. … If you flout epistemic duty in accepting the one, then you flout it just as surely in accepting the other; hence if the former is irrational, so is the latter."[14] But since we grant the rationality of belief in other minds despite the lack of conclusive arguments, so we should grant the rationality of belief in God.

At bottom, what does the work in Plantinga's analogies between belief in God and other beliefs is the demand for epistemic parity between basic beliefs about God and basic beliefs about other matters which are routinely accepted as rational despite the lack of conclusive argumentative support for those beliefs.[15] Although Plantinga and other Reformed Epistemologists make a great show of being, in their theory of perception, direct realists

[13] Rivers of ink have been spilled over the famous Great Pumpkin's objection. I cannot follow here all the twists and turns of the arguments and counter-arguments. For a canonical text on the Great Pumpkin's objection see Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', pp. 74-78.

[14] Plantinga, 'Preface to the 1990 Paperback Edition', *God and other Minds*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. xi-xii.

[15] Cf. Alston's rejection of epistemic double-standards (summarized in *Perceiving God*, pp. 248-250).

inspired by Thomas Reid's attack on the Lockean way of ideas,[16] it seems to me that it is not direct realism that bears the weight of Reformed Epistemology's argument.

First of all, even if (as suggested by Wolterstorff)[17] we recast the classical terminology of knowledge and belief in terms of basic beliefs versus mediated beliefs, direct realists of the Reidian kind would agree with the despised 'classical foundationalists' in regarding sense-perception as having a special epistemic status which is not extensible to all manner of other putative doxastic mechanisms.[18]

Secondly, and most importantly, the weight of Plantinga's argument does not rest on the direct-realist claim that sense-perception put us in direct cognitive contact with the world, but on the claim that basic beliefs resulting from sense-perception (or rational intuition, memory, and so on) have no better claim to epistemic justification than basic belief about God. The crucial point is that no cognitive faculty has independent justification for the reliability of the beliefs that it produces: that these beliefs are mostly true must be taken, ultimately, on trust.[19] Far from genuinely building on direct realism and its claim of a direct openness of the mind to the world, Plantinga's overarching project is best understood, in my view, as a kind of neo-Cartesianism according to which we can be rescued from a thoroughgoing scepticism about the reliability of our beliefs (including perceptual beliefs and a priori beliefs) only in a theistic framework.[20]

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[16] Reformed Epistemology's links with the views of Thomas Reid are discussed by Peter Byrne, 'Reidianism in contemporary English-speaking religious epistemology', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3/2 (Autumn 2011), pp. 267-284.

[17] Cf. RE 252.

[18] Cf. Byrne, 'Reidianism', pp. 279, 283. Byrne stresses that, in non-inferential belief formation, Reid only allows universal practice/process such as sense perception and memory -- something which is indeed noted and lamented by Alston.

[19] Cf. Alston's claim that all doxastic practices are irremediably circular and can only be self-supporting.

[20] Joel Pust stresses that Plantinga's "pattern of concession with regard to the classical skeptical problems appears in his treatment of our belief that we are persisting things, of our belief (on the basis of memory) that certain things have happened, of our belief that other minds exist, of beliefs formed on the basis of testimony of other persons, of perceptual belief in the external world, *a priori* beliefs, and inductive beliefs." ('Skepticism, Reason, and Reidianism,' in *The A Priori in Philosophy*, edited by Albert Casullo and Joshua C. Thurow, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 210-211). The latent skepticism and neo-Cartesianism of Plantinga's position is briefly noted by Laurent BonJour at the end of 'Plantinga on Knowledge and Proper Function,' in Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga's Theory of Knowledge*, Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1996, p. 69.

The neo-Cartesian bent of this project becomes apparent in the later phase of Plantinga's work in which, under the pressure of objections, he sharpens his epistemic model. It is time, therefore, to shine the spotlight on the epistemic framework in which Plantinga's proposal is located. From his forays into religious epistemology onward, Plantinga's proposal takes for granted the twentieth-century epistemological orthodoxy according to which knowledge is a kind of *belief* which meets certain criteria (namely, truth plus some additional, duly de-Gettierized justificatory condition or set of conditions). Plantinga's particular version of the received doctrine, expounded at great length in his massive trilogy on 'warrant', conceives knowledge as warranted true belief.[21]

Warranted Christian Belief and the Claim that "Faith is *Knowledge*"

Warrant, Plantinga explains, is "that property – or better, *quantity* – enough of which is what makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief." (WCB xi). Warrant is what turns true belief into knowledge. It is "intimately connected with *proper function*: … a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive processes or faculties that are functioning properly, in a cognitive environment that is propitious for that exercise of cognitive powers, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true beliefs." (p. xi)

Plantinga's approach to belief justification (taken in the loose sense of 'being rationally acceptable') shows here its uncompromising externalism: a belief is (loosely speaking) justified, or (strictly speaking) warranted, if it is the product of a well-functioning belief-forming mechanism. The subject does not need to be aware of this cognitive mechanism, and/or of its proper function, in order for her belief to have warrant. There is no requirement whatsoever for her to be able to give reasons in support of her belief. It is worth noting that in defending externalism Plantinga is once again sailing with the tide: most present-day epistemologists accept one version or another of externalism,[22] namely the view that, in order for a belief to be justified or rationally held, the justification status of a belief

[21] Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 (hereafter WCB).

[22] There are, of course, notable exceptions (cf. Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, 'Internalism Defended', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 38 /1 (2001): 1-18 and Richard Feldman, 'Justification is Internal', in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, edited by Matthias Steup, John Turri, and Ernest Sosa, 2nd ed., Wiley Blackwell, 2014, pp. 337-350).

need not (and most often, is not) directly accessible to the subject. Furthermore, as has been noted, Plantinga's epistemological proposal is at bottom nothing else than a variant of the widely held externalist model which goes under the label of reliabilism.[23] A belief has warrant just in case it is produced by a reliable belief-forming mechanism working in the appropriate circumstances.

Armed with his version of a well-honed and still fashionable (especially in the US) epistemological model, Plantinga is now able to claim that "what is required for *knowledge* is [i] that belief be produced by cognitive faculties or processes that are working properly, [ii] in an appropriate epistemic environment … [iii] according to a design plan that is aimed at truth, and [iv] is furthermore *successfully* aimed at truth. But according to this model, what one believes by faith (the beliefs that constitute faith) meets these four conditions."[24] As such, "Faith is *Knowledge*" (WCB 256-258).

More specifically, 'faith' is identified by Plantinga with a belief-forming process (analogous to sense-perception, memory, or rational intuition) which, when working properly, produces warranted true beliefs.[25] With faith understood in this way, Plantinga's aim in *Warranted Christian Belief* becomes much bolder than in his earlier work, namely, he intends now to show how "the full panoply of Christian belief in all its particularity" can enjoy the three main varieties of "positive epistemic status", that is, justification, rationality, and warrant.[26] Given the epistemological framework in which Plantinga is operating, Christian belief counts, therefore, as *knowledge*.

Furthermore, on this model, "it is really the *unbeliever* who displays epistemic malfunction; failing to believe in God is a result of some kind of dysfunction of the *sensus divinitatis*" (WCB 184) due to the noetic effects of sin.[27] More generally, it turns out that only in a theistic framework are all the conditions of warrant fulfilled: only if (a non-deceiving) God exists can we be sure that our cognitive faculties or belief-forming mechanisms work to a design plan that is aimed at truth. The most popular alternative theory, Darwinian natural

[23] See Byrne, 'Reidianism', p. 275.

[24] WCB 256 (i-iv added for clarity purposes).

[25] Cf. WCB 257: "when these beliefs are accepted by faith and result from the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, they are produced by cognitive processes working properly … Faith, the whole *process* that produces them, is specifically designed by God himself to produce this very effect … the beliefs in question satisfy the external rationality condition, which is also the first condition of warrant."

[26] Cf. WCB 241-289 (see, for instance, pp. 241, 252).

[27] On "the noetic effects of sin" see esp. WCB 213-240.

selection, tells us that evolution aims at survival not at truth.[28] As in Descartes so in Plantinga, it is the existence of (a non-deceiving) God which ultimately rescue us from an ingulfing skepticism about the truth of our beliefs since only a theistic metaphysics can reassure us that our belief-forming mechanisms have been designed to reach truth.[29] In brief, only in a theistic framework, beliefs have warrant sufficient to turn them into knowledge.

There is, however, a key difference. Descartes thought that he had watertight demonstrations of the existence of God. On the contrary, much of the impetus of Reformed Epistemology comes from the acknowledgement that none of the arguments for the existence of God can claim such an exalted demonstrative status. In fact, arguing for the existence of God is precisely what Reformed Epistemology *does not* want to do. God's existence is simply *assumed* (or, in a more distinctly Plantingian terminology, it is simply held as a basic belief). Given the assumption that God exists, or given the basic belief which a religious believer simply finds himself having, Plantinga's project is not to show that this basic belief is true, but that this basic belief is rationally held even in the absence of any argument or evidence for its truth.

As Plantinga puts it, there are two types of objections to belief in the existence of (a Christian) God: *de facto* objections, that is, objections to the *truth* of this belief (WCB viii), and *de jure* objections, that is, "arguments or claims to the effect that Christian belief, whether or not true, is at any rate unjustifiable, or rationally unjustified, or irrational" (p. ix). The main question of *Warranted Christian Belief* is the following: "is there a viable *de jure* objection to Christian belief? One that is independent of the *de facto* objections and does not presuppose that Christian belief is false?" (p. x) Plantinga's answer is a resounding "no": there are no viable *De Jure* objections independent of the *De Facto* objections (see esp. 190-191).

That is, in his view, all objections to the rationality of holding the belief that God exists (*de jure* question) *presuppose* the falsity of this belief (*de facto* question). It is only because it has already been assumed that (as a matter of fact) God does not exist -- Plantinga argues -- that atheistic world-views such as Marxism or Freudianism conclude that it is

[28] Cf. WCB 227-240 ("Naturalism and Lack of Knowledge").

[29] According to Wolterstorff and Plantinga, who in turn claim inspiration from Thomas Reid, from a classical Cartesian point of view, a priori beliefs are just as exposed to skepticism as perceptual beliefs and beliefs in other minds. Cf. Pust, 'Skepticism, Reason, and Reidianism', p. 219.

irrational to believe in God.[30] On the contrary, if one presupposes that (as a matter of fact) God exists (that is, if one holds God's existence as a basic belief), then there is a perfectly coherent explanation of why belief in God is rationally held despite the lack of propositional evidence or arguments in support of this belief. In a world-view which includes the existence of God, it makes sense to hold that God has equipped human beings with a properly functioning belief-forming mechanism which, in the presence of appropriate stimula, lead them to believe that God exists. Assuming (as this world-view does) that it is true that God exists, belief in God's existence is true and warranted. Hence this belief qualifies as knowledge.

Interestingly, Wolterstorff himself notes the similarity between this approach and the approach of another prominent movement in Anglophone analytical religious epistemology, namely, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism'. In a series of notes written between 1948 and 1951 (now published under the title *On Certainty*) Wittgenstein stresses that every belief presupposes a system of beliefs. Together, these beliefs constitute a "world-view" or a "form of life". Any belief can be confirmed or disconfirmed only within the "world-view" or "form of life" to which this belief belongs. Wittgensteinian fideists apply the notions of "world-view" or "form of life" to religion, arguing that religion, like all other human activities (including, notably, science), has its own *internal* criteria of meaning and rationality.[31] Despite disagreement with Wittgensteinianism's typical assumption that religious language is non-referential (and hence with its inclination toward anti-realism or fictionalism about religion and God), Wolterstorff draws attention to the fact that for both Wittgensteinianism and Reformed Epistemology religion is a "world-view" which interprets ordinary reality and ordinary experience in its own, internally coherent, way. This implies that its coherence can be ascertained only from 'within' such world-view, as opposed to being measured through some 'external' standards.[32]

To conclude, Plantinga's bold claim that Christian faith, with all its distinctive mysteries (Trinity, Incarnation, and so on), is, in a word, *knowledge*, represents a radical attempt to turn the tables on the failure of the classical arguments for the existence of God to provide knowledge of the existence God. In my view, however, this attempt issues in a general weakening of rationality rather than in a plausible defense of Christian belief from the

[30] Cf. WCB 135-163.

[31] See *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, 'Introduction', pp. 8-9.

[32] See RE 245-271.

charge of irrationality. Rather than elevating religious belief to the status to knowledge, all knowledge is reduced to the particular beliefs of incommensurable world-views.

Wolterstorff's comparison between Reformed Epistemology and Wittgensteinianism shows that Reformed Epistemology's new project is in fact, at heart, a version of an older and well-attested position, namely fideism. As Wolterstorff himself maintains, "the Reformed tradition has been fideist, not evidentialist, in its impulse", adding that, in his view, "that impulse is correct".[33] Reformed Epistemologists are right in pointing out that their project is profoundly different from the enterprise of natural theology, since at the core of that enterprise is the view that there are shared criteria of meaning and rationality which allow a genuine dialogue amongst all human beings, whether religious believers or non-believers. Rather than conceiving human beings as playing mutually incommunicable language games, each with its own internally coherent rules, natural theology builds on the premise that reason is a common language with rules which are shared across world-views.

Most importantly, it seems to me that the very project of turning religious belief into knowledge is misguided. The acknowledgment that natural theology does not provide *knowledge* of the existence of God but, at best, rational arguments for the reasonableness of *believing* in God's existence, is not (in my view) a sign of failure but a reflection of the epistemic status of human cognition with regard to putative super-natural entities. Furthermore, it seems to me that undermining the fundamental difference of kind between belief and knowledge does not ultimately help the cause of religious belief. On the contrary, it compromises the aspect of epistemic uncertainty, and consequently the element of trust, which is traditionally regarded as essential to faith. In a word, it comprises the notion of 'faith' itself.

Reformed Epistemology's twenty-century version of fideism is rooted, in my view, in a mistaken twenty-century account of knowledge as a kind of *belief* which meets certain criteria. The astute but profoundly problematic consequences drawn by Reformed Epistemology from a flat-out use of this widely-endorsed epistemic model constitute, in my view, one of the best illustrations of the untenability of the model itself.

An Alternative Framework

[33] Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Is Reason Enough?', in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, pp. 142-149, here p. 149; reprinted from *The Reformed Journal*, 31 (April 1981).

The short-comings of the JTB+ twenty-century orthodoxy have been exposed in recent epistemological work of various stripes, stirring the lively debates which agitate current epistemology. What was until recently regarded as the 'standard account' is no longer consensual, yet no new consensus has emerged to replace it.[34]

In what follows, I gesture at an alternative account which builds on a traditional strand of thought according to which knowledge and belief are distinct in kind in the strong sense that knowing is *not* a superior species of believing, but a mental state of a radically different kind. This is a tradition which should be, in my view, recovered as a path to an account of cognition which avoid altogether many of the pitfalls endlessly discussed in post-Gettier literature. In particular, it seems to me that a conception of knowledge and belief as two irreducibly different mental states is especially important in religious epistemology in safeguarding the distinctive epistemological status of religious belief.

According to a version of this tradition, although fundamentally different, knowledge and belief can both be conceived as a species of the genus "thinking with assent [cum assensione cogitare]".[35] This is a model inspired by the account of cognition given by Thomas Aquinas in *ST* IIa IIae, q. 1, art. 4 – an account which, in my view, captures central insights of both the Platonic and the Aristotelian traditions. According to this model, we "think with assent":

1.) when we *know* something – that is, when the mind's assent is moved "by the object itself" (we 'see' or 'grasp' it, either literally in sense perception or metaphorically in the case of intellectual perception);
2.) when we *believe* something – that is, when the mind's assent is not moved "by its proper object" but by other reasons; here is where justification, marks of truth, warrant etc. come in.[36]

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[34] A main rival to the JTB+ orthodoxy has emerged in the UK at the turn of the century, namely, the "Knowledge-First Epistemology" advocated by Timothy Williamson in his ground-breaking monograph *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Note, however, that also Williamson's position belongs to the family of externalist theories of knowledge.

[35] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Textum Leoninum) IIa IIae, q. 2, art. 1 (available online in Corpus Thomisticum: http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/. Hereafter *ST* followed by part, question and article).

[36] "Now the intellect assents [assentit] to something in two ways. One way, because it is moved to assent by the object itself [ab ipso objecto], which is known either through itself [per seipsum cognitum] (as in the case of first principles, of which there is understanding [intellectus]), or through something else already known [per aliud cognitum] (as in the case of conclusions, of which there is knowledge [scientia]). In another way, the intellect assents to something, not because it is sufficiently moved to this assent by its proper object, but through a certain voluntary choice turning toward one side rather than the other. And if this is done with doubt or fear of

This model of cognition pivots on a traditional conception of knowledge as the adequation of mind to reality or, in modern parlance, the adaptation of mind to the world. According to this conception, there is a primitive 'openness' of mind to reality. Knowledge is a primitive mental state characterized by the presence of an object to the mind which immediately moves assent. In other words, knowledge is the immediate presence or manifestation of an object (broadly understood) to the mind in which there is an effective, primitive cognitive contact between mind and the world with no 'gap' between knower and known. In traditional scholastics terms, *cognoscens in actu et cognitum in actu sunt unum* [in the act of knowing, the knower is one with the known, in its being known] – an identity expressed by some later authors (Brentano, Husserl) as the intentional (as opposed to real) identity of knower and known in the act of knowing. In turn, belief is an irreducibly different mental state in which the object of cognition is *not* immediately present to the mind, and assent is moved by reasons external to the object itself. Knowledge and belief are not essentially distinguished by the firmness of assent to the object of cognition, but by the immediate presence versus the lack of presence of the object of cognition to the mind and, accordingly, by the different way in which the mind assents to it.

An immediate objection is likely to be that the difference between this model and models assuming that knowing entails believing is purely verbal. It may be objected that what Aquinas calls 'assent' is what Anglophone literature calls 'belief', and that it would be enough to substitute 'belief' for 'assent' and 'credence' or 'opinion' for 'belief' to obtain the

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the opposite side, there will be opinion [opinio]; if, on the other hand, this is done with certainty [cum certitudine] and without such fear, there will be faith [fides]. Now those things are said to be seen [videri dicuntur] which, by themselves, move our intellect or the senses to knowledge of them [ad sui cognitionem]. Wherefore it is evident [manifestum est] that neither faith nor opinion can be of things seen [nec fides nec opinio potest esse de visis] either by the senses or by the intellect." (*ST* IIa IIae, q. 1, a. 4; my trans.) See also *ST* IIa IIae, q. 1, a. 5 (my trans.): "all knowledge [scientia] is acquired through some self-evident, and therefore 'seen', principles [principia per se nota, et per consequens visa]. And for that reason it is necessary that whatsoever is known is, in some way, seen [quaecumque sunt scita aliquo modo esse visa]. Now, as stated above [art. 4], it is not possible that the same thing should be believed and seen by the same person. Hence it is indeed impossible that the same thing be known and believed [scitum et creditum] by the same person. Nevertheless it may happen that what is seen or known [visum vel scitum] by one, is believed by another. …the reason why the same thing cannot simultaneously and in the same respect be known and believed, is that what is known is seen whereas what is believed is not seen [ea ratione non potest simul idem et secundum idem esse scitum et creditum, quia scitum est visum et creditum est non visum]."

view that knowing and believing are not incompatible. In that case, belief would cover, or be entailed by, both knowledge and credence / opinion.

In my view, however, this objection misses the point. What is at issue is not what *terms* we choose to indicate a more general cognitive mode and its species, but what are the most fundamental modes of human cognition and how they are distinct from one another. A key aspect of the problem is the ambiguous use that has been made of the notion of 'belief' to cover significantly different things -- including some state which is either 'on' or 'off', and some state which has degrees. This ambiguity has resulted in a number of questions. For instance, how is it that a state which is on-or-off can also have degrees? How is it that 'belief' does not seem to be under voluntary control while low degrees of 'belief' which allow for significant uncertainty seem to be responsive in some ways to the will? Hence the current tendency to call the on/off state 'belief', and the state allowing degrees 'credence'. 'Credence', however, is the Latin version of the Germanic 'belief'. Interestingly, the artificially distinct use of these two terms in present-day Anglophone epistemology cannot be replicated in a straight-forward way in Romance languages such as Italian or French. This artificially distinct use nevertheless signals something very important: namely, a growing acknowledgement in Anglophone epistemology that aspects of our cognition that have commonly been subsumed under the notion of 'belief' need instead to be distinguished.

In sum, as noted by William Alston,[37] over the past century or so, epistemology has been characterized by "an inflated use of 'believe'" in which "the term 'belief' has been allowed to spread over any positive propositional attitude". This blanket use of 'belief' was, however, far from standard in the philosophical tradition stretching back to antiquity. Nor was it is approved by the very architect of Anglophone epistemology, John Locke, who took such great care in ensuring that the term 'belief' was not a general term which also covered knowledge. It seems to me that the inflated use of 'belief' has its roots in Humean scepticism. Once scepticism declared that all putative knowledge is really, at bottom, belief, the scene was set for a conception of belief as the umbrella under which to group all cognitive modes. The later attempt to rescue knowledge from this sceptical attack via the specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions belief must meet to qualify as knowledge led precisely to the conception of knowledge as (de-Gettierized) justified true belief that an increasing number of epistemologists is now urging to abandon.

[37] William Alston, 'Belief, acceptance and religious faith', in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*, ed. by J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996, p. 20.

In line with this growing revolt against post-Gettier epistemology, I propose to recover a well-attested tradition of conceiving the most general positive epistemic attitude as "thinking with assent", distinguishing it from the notion of 'belief' as the specific cognitive mode in which assent is moved by external reasons, as opposed to being *compelled* by "clear vision [*manifesta visio*]" (*ST* IIa IIae, q. 2, a. 1), that is, by the presence of the object of cognition to the mind.

A key implication of this proposal is that, as in the best early modern tradition, the bar for knowledge is set very high – and, I contend, rightly so. What we know (and can know) is limited because, rigorously speaking, knowledge is akin to direct acquaintance and involves understanding. Its paradigmatic modes are sense-perception, rational intuition (*intuitus*, *intellectus*), and introspection. Demonstrative reasoning (as traditionally conceived) also qualifies as knowledge (*scientia*) but it is ultimately reducible to seeing or grasping, that is, rationally intuiting, the truth of each inference in the demonstrative chain.[38]

That is, at its most fundamental, knowing is to 'see' or 'grasp' something. For instance, knowing that the sum of the internal angles of a Euclidean triangle is 180 degrees, because I clearly see what follows from what, is different in kind from believing this same mathematical truth on the basis of having found it stated in reliable mathematical books. Or, to circumvent the (frankly unavoidable) 'seeing' and 'grasping' metaphors, knowing can be characterized through a perceptual model according to which the mind directly *perceives* an object or, in intellectual perception, *understands* a truth. Therefore, setting the bar very high for knowledge does not imply, or lead to, a sceptical position. Quite the opposite. What we know in the strict sense may be very limited, but one could not overstate its importance. Without knowledge, that is, without a primitive presence of some object to the mind, none of our cognition could even get going.

A direct implication of this proposal is that the great majority of what we can pursue in our successful cognition is not knowledge but justified true belief with different degrees of justification. While agreeing with Timothy Williamson's slogan "knowledge first!"[39] (namely, with the claim that knowledge is conceptually and ontologically prior to belief), the complementary slogan of this proposal is: "give belief its due!"

[38] Cf. René Descartes, *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii*, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols, ed. by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897-1909, vol. X, pp. 368-370.

[39] See Williamson's remark at the beginning of his *Knowledge and its Limits*: "If I had to summarize this book in two words, they would be: knowledge first." ('Preface')

Belief is by far the most common mode of our cognition, since assent to the object of cognition which is directly moved by the presence or direct manifestation of the object of cognition to the mind is possible only in limited cases. Most of our cognitive activity relies on assent given to the object of cognition for reasons external to the object itself. No amount of reasons or justification supporting such belief will turn this mode of cognition into the direct presence of the object to the mind which characterizes knowledge. On the other hand, *justified* belief is mostly reliable in tracking truth, and constitutes an ineliminable mode of our cognition with the enormous power of extending our cognitive grip on the world beyond the little which (strictly speaking) can be known. Contrary to Williamson's claim that belief aims at knowledge,[40] it seems to me that the specific contribution of belief to our cognition is that of aiming at truth where and when knowledge is out of our cognitive reach (either for objective or for subjective reasons). In this framework, therefore, belief aims at truth, not at knowledge.

Moreover, since it is clear from the outset that justified true belief is not knowledge, the need to de-Gettierize justified true belief due to its being insufficient for knowledge does not even arise. Finally, although the justification of a belief is typically provided by other justified beliefs, ultimately justification is provided by knowledge, that is, by the primitive leap of understanding of some truth, or the primitive perception of some object which ultimately justifies belief (often beyond reasonable doubt) in something which is not directly seen or perceived.

Conclusion

Once the project of turning belief into knowledge through the addition of necessary and sufficient conditions is abandoned, the scene is set also for an approach to religious epistemology which is fundamentally different from Plantinga's approach. This alternative approach fully acknowledges the distinction between knowledge and belief, and conceives knowledge as a cognitive mode sparingly available only in areas which are plausibly within the reach of limited cognitive faculties. At the same time, this approach is open to the rational justifiability of religious belief, intended as the cognitive element of a broader attitude which involves both cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions, namely, faith. In other words, this proposal shares Plantinga's aim of defending religious belief from the charge of irrationally

[40] Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, pp. 47-8; see also p. 1.

but regards the attempt to turn religious belief into knowledge as ill-judged. A distinctive feature of religious belief is that of being primarily (if not exclusively) about matters which surpass the limits of a finite mind. If most of what we do in our successful cognition is justified true belief, it is hardly surprising that when the object of cognition is some putative super-natural entity, the appropriate cognitive mode is belief rather than knowledge.

I do not to intend to deny that some things may be known also in the domain of religion, but I contend that the specific epistemic status of what, in that domain, is held by faith is belief, not knowledge.[41] This is, once again, in line with an illustrious tradition which distinguishes between truths which are "according to reason" and truths which are "above reason" -- the latter being the proper objects of faith as revealed truths that surpass the ability of human reason to discover and fully comprehend.[42]

Finally, according to this proposal, religious belief, like any other belief, does need justification which is, ultimately, grounded in what we know about the world -- namely, in our perception of some object or understanding of some truth. Pace Reformed Epistemology, the best way to provide epistemic justification for religious belief remains the tried and tested one of giving reasons for believing something that cannot, typically, be known. This does not mean that every religious believer must be able to produce formal arguments in order to fulfil her epistemic duties as a rational human being. But there must be reasons for believing something which can be produced, if not by every individual, at least by someone in the community.[43] As a distinguished critic of Plantinga has stressed, "conscientious believers as well as objectors live by the evidentialist canon. There *is* deficiency in a faith that can give no reason, even if not everyone who holds such a faith is epistemically deficient."[44]

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[41] Cf. *ST* IIa IIae, q. 1, art. 5.

[42] Cf. Locke, *Essay*, Book IV, chap. xvii, § 23 and chap. xviii, § 6 and Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 'Preliminary Discourse,' §23. The view defended by Locke and Leibniz is by no means new: cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* lib. I cap. 4-7 (see esp. cap. 5).

[43] Cf. Leibniz, *Examen Religionis Christianae*, in G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by the Academy of Sciences of Berlin, series I–VIII, Darmstadt, Leipzig, and Berlin, 1923 ff., series VI, vol. 4, p. 2362.

[44] Norman Kretzmann, 'Evidence and Religious Belief', in B. Davies, *Philosophy of Religion: a Guide and Anthology*, New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 95-107 (here p. 105) (edited extract from 'Evidence against Anti-Evidentialism', in *Our Knowledge of God*, edited by K. J. Clark, Kluwer Academic Press, 1992).